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Psychology and Missile Defense: Again Rising Like a Phoenix

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Abstract. This article identifies several psychological Issues bearing on the latest ballistic missile defense policies of the United States Government.

Journalists suggest that the United States Government (USG) intends to move ever more quickly to develop a ballistic missile defense and to abandon or fundamentally alter the 1972 Antiballistic Missile Treaty. If the journalists are correct, political psychologists might note several psychological Issues bearing on the USG policy direction.

First, the USG now seems to have a goal of complicating "'a prospective opponent's calculation of success, adding to his uncertainty and weakening his confidence'" and not "an air-tight defense against even a small attack." Given that the opponent is primarily a leader or leaders of a rogue nation who may demonstrate very different sorts of logic, rationality, and belief systems from those of the leaders of the USG, complicating the deliberations of that opponent may have little to do with the viability of a ballistic missile defense. Plus how one complicates motivation for an accidental launch is certainly food for epistemological and metaphysical analysis.

Second, the European allies of the USG seem prepared to go along with the USG policy direction--however grudgingly--if the USG consults first them. However, USG public announcements suggest that the direction and a number of its parameters are non-negotiable. Thus, to obtain European support, the USG might wish to consult the psychological research on inducing perceptions of empowerment, involvement, and procedural justice.

Third is the Issue of trust. The USG seems ready to reduce its number of nuclear warheads in conjunction with developing and fielding a ballistic missile defense. But what can be reduced also can be increased at a later time. The USG states that the rationale for a missile defense involves rogue nations, accidental launches, and terrorist threats. But what appears necessary to complicate matters in these situations also may serve to complicate matters for other nuclear adversaries who adhere to a deterrence concept based on calculations of comparative offensive and defensive capabilities. Moreover, some supporters and staffers of USG authorities seem to suggest that ballistic missile defense may even be secondary to abrogating or violating the 1972 Antiballistic Missile Treaty. How one engenders perceptions of trust, however, is still too much a nomothetic than an idiographic proposition in the psychological literature.

As with constructs like deterrence, massive retaliation, parity, and mutually assured destruction, the essence of nuclear weapons policies are permeated with psychological phenomena--a tremendous opportunity for political psychologists to make a difference. (See Cascardi, M., Poythress, N. G., & Hall, A. (2000). Procedural justice in the context of civil commitment: An analogue study. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, 18, 731-740; Gordon, M.R., & Myers, S.L. (April 30, 2001). Bush team vows to speed up work on missile shield. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Hamilton, V.L. (2000). (In)Justice in waiting: Russian officers' organizational commitment and mental distress during downsizing. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 30, 1995-2027; Nisbett, R. E., Peng, K., Choi, I., & Norenzayan, A. (2001).

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Treaty, Ballistic Missile Defense.)